

Visiting prisons Volunteers live Gospel message

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Feed the hungry. Check. Clothe the naked. Check. Visit me in prison.
Oops.

That Gospel call is harder to answer.

But volunteers in the archdiocese's prison outreach program respond, holding Communion services in jails that don't have Mass, leading Bible study or just offering clerical help.

Patrick "Chris" Schwartz became involved in 2001 when his niece was arrested for murder. He was shocked to learn that Communion wasn't available in her Virginia prison. She was later transferred to another facility, where a nun began teaching her catechism.

"Sister Grace changed my niece's life," Mr. Schwarz said. "That was something I needed to pay back."

He joined the choir at St. Lawrence Martyr, Jessup, figuring, correctly, that a church near prisons might have a ministry.

But the prison ministry led him to something even bigger. On Sundays, he would write a little reflection to share with the prisoners. After six months, another volunteer pulled him aside and said, "You need to be a deacon."

Today, he's in the Archdiocese of Washington's diaconate program. He teaches a Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults class at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women; his first class led to one baptism and three confirmations, and 10 women are enrolled today. He leads Communion services and gives guitar lessons on Wednesday nights. Those are available to prisoners of any religion, he said, "but the next thing I know they've signed up for Catholic services."

Another volunteer from St. Lawrence Martyr, John "Ray" Ogden, is retired from both the government and the school system. He volunteers daily at the women's prison, helping the chaplain with paperwork and simple word processing, freeing the chaplain to visit and counsel prisoners. He also helps Mr. Schwartz with services on Sunday.

Sister Dolores Chepiga, S.S.J., coordinator of prison outreach for St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore, isn't sure why Catholics don't volunteer more in prisons.

"Protestants do that," she said. "Whole churches will go in. It is an area where Catholics for some reason don't do it – we need to give people a chance to answer the call of Jesus."

She understands how intimidating it can be – her first assignment was in a maximum security facility in Philadelphia. "It was very scary going in ... I had to pass 50 fierce-looking men. Of course I found out later

they weren't like that at all."

She stresses that volunteers do not go into prisons alone.

Volunteers must first go through a screening process that includes fingerprinting and a tuberculosis test. It can take more than a year, especially to work with youthful offenders.

"That's where we have the least number of volunteers," Sister Dolores said.

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– *Sister Dolores Chepiga, S.S.J.*

Once cleared, volunteers do everything from Communion services to centering prayers. They tutor inmates, helping some learn to read or others with a GED. One volunteer in a juvenile facility runs a group discussion on faith while another organizes a book club.

Sister Dolores begins by meeting with a volunteer "to see what skills they have that could be brought into a prison."

She also trains them in the ways of a prison. As a new volunteer years ago, she brought in balloons for a celebration, and a prisoner took one back to his cell, filled it with drugs and swallowed it to transport drugs. After nearly two decades ministering in prisons, she's wiser now.

Tracey Eberhardt, a faith community nurse and director of health ministry at St. Francis of Assisi, Fulton, had to be persuaded to take on prison ministry. One parishioner kept bugging her "and I finally said OK. It took more than a year to get everything approved."

That was five years ago, and she's been doing Communion services at the Brockbridge Correctional Facility in Jessup and started a Bible study group there.

"The men were asking for it, but I didn't want to start anything until I knew I had enough volunteers," she said, adding that four parishes – St. Louis, Clarksville; Resurrection of Our Lord, Laurel; Church of the Resurrection, Burtonsville, in the Archdiocese of Washington; and St. Francis of Assisi – join forces for prison ministry.

Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, eastern vicar, supports those who minister in prisons, with Masses at retreats and enrichment days. He also takes prison chaplains to lunch, continuing the support network provided by now-retired Bishop William C. Newman, who celebrated Mass in prisons.

"Our priests, deacons, religious men and women, and lay people who bring the presence of Jesus to the men and women in prison do so with great dedication, love and joy," Bishop Rozanski said. "Their ministry brings great hope to those who are seeking God in their lives and who want to reform and start anew. I draw great strength from the witness of those who minister in the prison system of our state."

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Volunteers Kim Arnold (left), Judy Goyette and Lois Cronin prepare to enter the Baltimore County Department of Correction Women's Facility.